

CHAPTER 2

BROOKS COUNTY, GEORGIA

CPS reform efforts in Brooks County, Georgia, have resulted in the development of a revised written protocol for multiagency cooperation for child abuse and neglect cases and the establishment of a multidisciplinary team for case review. These innovations have also increased cooperation among those agencies with a role in CPS.

OVERVIEW OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES (CPS)

The Georgia Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS) is a State-supervised, county-administered system. Brooks County DFCS has jurisdiction of a single, rural county. The District Attorney's Office for Brooks County covers six adjacent counties and is supported by nine assistant District Attorneys. There are four municipalities within the county, but the Sheriff's Office, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, and the Quitman Police Department handle all child abuse and neglect allegations. As a relatively small and rural county (population 16,450) there is a culture and history of working together, according to staff who were interviewed.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CPS AGENCY

An executive director heads the Brooks County DFCS. There are two units under the director—Economic Security and Social Services. Economic Security handles Food Stamps, TANF, and Welfare to Work. Social Services is responsible for CPS and Placement, as well as Adult Protective Services. During 2001, the executive director split the responsibilities for CPS and Placement and added a second supervisor to Social Services. CPS and Placement were each assigned five caseworkers. Unfortunately, as of July 2002, CPS lost an allocation for one caseworker; the result has been an increase in CPS workload that is above State guidelines. One caseworker is assigned to intake, one assigned to investigation (with the support from one of the ongoing workers), and two workers are assigned to ongoing cases.

REFORM EFFORTS

Revising the interagency protocol for the Brooks County child protection system was initiated locally. The revisions updated the 1986 protocol by adding a Victim Assistance Program (VAP), which handles victim support and domestic violence in the Brooks County Sheriff's Office. A magistrate judge handles issuance of warrants, bonds setting, and probable cause hearings. The revisions also addressed such issues as confidentiality and information sharing, and outlined a number of new procedures. One major change that resulted from the revisions to the protocol was the establishment of a multidisciplinary team (MDT) for case reviews. The revisions are discussed in further detail below.

Background of Reform Efforts

Agencies in the community recognized the need to update the protocol due to changes in staff and the addition of in-home services and assessment since the protocol had been written during

1986. While discussions about updating the protocol were initiated by the director of the VAP prior to 2001, two occurrences during 2001 brought the issue to the forefront. First, a new CPS supervisor was hired during January 2001. The new CPS supervisor made updating the protocol a priority, helping to get the process underway. Second, problems with interactions among agencies were underscored in two local cases in which the involved schools failed to follow the appropriate policy and, therefore, the District Attorney was not able to file charges.

Agencies and other relevant parties that participated in the protocol revisions included the District Attorney's office, three law enforcement agencies—Quitman Police Department, Brooks County Sheriff's Office, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation—the public school system, one private school, Behavioral Mental Health Services (the county mental health department), the pediatrician who handles most of the exams for child abuse and neglect, the VAP, the coroner, the Juvenile Court judge, the Brooks County magistrate, the Brooks County Health Department, and the Department of Juvenile Justice. Additionally, Family Services Connections served as an advisory group to the protocol committee, attended all meetings, and cosigned the protocol. The Family Services Connection is a collaborative of agencies—Extension Service, public health, and faith-based groups—and community representatives that receive State funds to address child abuse prevention education. DFCS staff reported that the involvement of Family Services Connections in the protocol revisions increased the visibility of the effort within the community.

Implementation of the Reform

During the revision process, agencies met once or twice a month for 6 months. The director of the VAP chaired the meetings. Agency representatives reviewed the protocol section that pertained to their agency. The meetings also fostered information exchanges. For example, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation provided a history of the existing procedures and explained the role of the agency.

The revised protocol includes the following topics:

- Purpose;
- Meetings;
- Committee meetings;
- Chairperson;
- Training;
- Reports;
- Confidentiality and sharing of information;
- Multidisciplinary Team Review (MDT);
- Role of the Department of Family and Children Services (including topics of interagency interviews, videotaping, role of the public school system);
- Role of law enforcement in handling referrals of child abuse and neglect (including joint investigation criteria and procedures);
- Role of the Juvenile Court;
- Role of the Magistrate Court;
- Role of the District Attorney's office;
- Role of the Brooks County Community Services Board;
- Role of the Department of Juvenile Justice;

- Child Fatality Review;
- Victim Assistance Program;
- Domestic violence; and
- Child abuse prevention.

The process of revising the child abuse protocol served as cross-agency training for both new and experienced staff. As each agency revised its section of the protocol, the revisions were discussed so that all participating agencies understood the procedures within and across agencies. The protocol was completed during March 2002 and was circulated to all participants. The following agencies signed the protocol:

- District Attorney’s Office;
- Brooks County Department of Family and Children Services;
- Brooks County Schools;
- Quitman Policy Department;
- Brooks County Magistrate;
- Brooks County Juvenile Court;
- Brooks County Health Department;
- Physician;
- Brooks County Sheriff’s Office;
- Brooks County Behavioral Health;
- Westbrook School;
- Brooks County Coroner;
- Brooks County Sheriff’s Office Victim Assistance Program
- Brooks County Family Connection;
- Department of Juvenile Justice; and
- Georgia Bureau of Investigation—Region 9.

The document has since been used to help train both new and experienced staff.

Objectives

The primary objectives of the protocol updating process were to:

- Address such issues as confidentiality and information sharing policy;
- Incorporate State policy and current local practice (family-centered practice, interactions among law enforcement agencies, CPS, and VAP);
- Expand the protocol to include current offices and agencies;
- Broaden involvement of agencies with a role in the child protection system; and
- Identify issues among agencies to address child abuse and neglect.

Practice Components

The MDT review is one of the major changes written into the protocol. The protocol calls for “all agencies involved in the investigation, prosecution, treatment, and prevention of child abuse” to

participate.¹ The MDT review meetings are held at least quarterly and are chaired by the Sheriff's Office Victim Advocate—the director of the VAP. The office is responsible for identifying review cases in conjunction with the District Attorney.

The first MDT meeting occurred September 14, 2002, and participants included the CPS supervisor and caseworkers, sheriff's office investigators, Quitman Police Department investigators, GBI investigator, mental health workers, and service providers. Forty-four cases, many of which were older cases chosen to help address pending issues about current cases, were reviewed.

The expectation of the MDT is to meet monthly and to review cases closer to the point when they enter the system. The first MDT meeting had results similar to the protocol revision process. Some of the caseworkers, service providers, and investigators, who had not participated in the revision process, found it helpful to understand the role that different people and agencies played. Consequently, the first MDT meeting was also a training session.

Another key change is how CPS conducts an investigation that necessitates school system involvement. Previously, the schools insisted that CPS get parental permission prior to interviewing an alleged child victim. During the protocol revision the school system recognized that CPS can interview an alleged child victim without parental permission. However, the school administrator shall participate in the interview and DFCS will notify the parents that the child has been interviewed.

A third change is initiating cross-agency contact earlier. CPS contact the police or the VAP earlier in the investigation of a CPS case in order to conduct joint interviewing. CPS staff also reported receiving calls from the police and VAP sooner. (The earlier involvement of CPS by police was also the result of efforts that began approximately 2 years ago to videotape interviews with victims. DFCS staff generally conducted these interviews while the police and, at times, the District Attorney or Assistant District Attorney were linked to the interviews via radios.)

Results

Protocol development resulted in a number of changes in Brooks County and in Georgia.

Improvements in Working with the Schools

CPS staff reported overall improvements when working with schools and sharing information. The schools designated their social workers as contacts for DFCS, which facilitates the investigations. The new protocol specifically addresses information sharing as currently defined in State policy. CPS staff caseworkers also work with the schools in a State-mandated curriculum for school-age children. The program, Red Flag/Green Flag, discusses child abuse. The caseworkers attend the session during which “good touches/bad touches” are described, so that they can answer questions for the children and can talk to children who have indicated “bad touches.” The presence of the caseworkers in the schools during this time also increased the familiarity of the teachers and the social workers with CPS staff, which has facilitated communication during investigations.

¹ Brooks County Interagency Protocol. (March 2002). p. 3.

Improved Relationships

Several respondents commented on the improved relationship among agencies as a result of this protocol revision process. Many of the participants in the protocol committee were new, and agencies were learning together. Several respondents commented that the process enabled all of the participants to remind themselves of their goal—helping families—and to refocus their efforts on helping victims rather than on how to get things done. Another result of the process was increased court filings and court attendance by CPS workers.

The protocol committee was also responsible for coordinating activities for Child Abuse Prevention Month during April. Because of the efforts associated with the protocol, the April 2002 Child Abuse Prevention Month was very successful. All the groups that had been active in the revision process were equally active during April. Activities included poster contests for the schools and a community barbecue cohosted by VAP and law enforcement.

Increased Collaboration with Domestic Violence

The director of the VAP reported that eight counties have modeled their program on the one developed in Brooks County. Though located in the Sheriff's Office, the VAP works with the Quitman Police Department as closely, as well as with DFCS and the District Attorney. VAP has a dual role in working with DFCS—to support victims and nonoffending parents and to coordinate contact with domestic violence shelters and advocates in those cases involving domestic violence. DFCS reported that since the introduction of the VAP much of its work with domestic violence shelters has moved to that program. Police officers identify all children in the home when there is a domestic violence call. If the director or a volunteer did not accompany the officer on the call, a copy of the police report is forwarded to VAP regardless of police jurisdiction within the county. These in turn are forwarded to DFCS. DFCS reported that referrals have increased as a result of this program.

As of 2001, domestic violence staff became mandated reporters for child abuse. At the same time, the State of Georgia determined that witnessing violence is a form of child abuse and the police may charge the families with cruelty to children. However, the State DFCS did not implement a policy on how to help such children.² The county stated that additional guidance from the State would be helpful.

Increased Contracting of Services

Georgia initiated First Placement/Best Placement during 1999, which enables private contractors to conduct assessments for youth in foster care. The provider has 30 days after the DFCS custody hearing to assess the family and work with the caseworker to develop a plan for wraparound services for the family. The providers have the authority to assign any services to the family that can move the case into permanency planning—from parenting classes to interpreter services. Many of the service providers who conduct the assessments also provide services, so there is continuity of service provision. In addition to interviewing children, parents, and foster parents, the service providers arrange for dental, medical, and hearing exams to determine the health of the child. Family trees also are developed to identify relatives who may be able to provide care. Children older than 3 years and 11 months also receive a psychological evaluation by the

² The CPS supervisor reported that a policy was written, but was not signed during 2001.

contractors. The providers then follow through with the caseworkers, presenting their findings and recommendations.

At approximately the same time that First Placement was initiated, Georgia began recommending that CPS provide more in-home services to improve family safety. These services, though more costly, would provide direct service in the child's environment. The DFCS staff support in-home services, but were concerned that budget cuts would limit the availability of the services. There were only two providers for in-home services. Given the rural nature of Brooks County, many of the providers were located at a distance from the area and were simply not available for quick-turnaround issues. DFCS was working with the Social Work Department of Valdosta State University to develop a larger pool of local service providers.

Caseworkers reported that some of the benefits of increased private contracting are improved timeliness of services and assessments. Private contractors also provide another perspective on the family. Workers felt that families are more open with private contractors than with DFCS staff, even though DFCS has a positive reputation in the community. Consequently, the use of private contractors increases the amount of information available about families.

Improved Child Fatality Reviews

During 2002, there were two child deaths in Georgia. While the deaths did not occur in Brooks County, all counties were required to undertake case reviews in response to the deaths. CPS staff screened all active cases (n=74) and made home visits. Investigation and ongoing staff, as well as the supervisor were involved in these reviews. While such intensive visitation was difficult, there was a positive side to reviewing all cases simultaneously. First, by reviewing all cases by all workers, the supervisor was able to examine trends, such as the number of contacts and collateral contacts used and interactions with other agencies. This enabled the supervisor to identify and, in some cases, to provide training for weak areas. Second, the supervisor could review other trends and problem areas within the community. Third, the supervisor was able to identify five additional families who needed in-home services.

The child fatalities also resulted in a change in policy—keeping cases open until there is a resolution. Previously, a case was closed if the family moved out of the county. Given the movement of families across county lines, regional meetings have been established. Brooks County is participating in regional meetings with 17 other counties to discuss tracking and monitoring cases across county lines.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The section describes various factors that have helped to sustain the county's reform efforts and includes a discussion of the county's future plans for continuing its work in this area.

Conditions that Sustain Reform

During 2001, Georgia increased the pay scales for CPS staff, thereby providing additional funds for staff with advanced degrees. Because of the increased pay scale, DFCS was able to hire two staff with M.S.W. degrees and hire an experienced person with a B.A. in Social Work. Each of these individuals had been working with service providers in the community, was familiar with

DFCS, and knew the population that they would be working with. Hiring more experienced staff enabled the agency to take on full caseloads faster and work through cases more quickly than less experienced new hires.

As a result of the MDT meetings, the District Attorney is expected to assign one Assistant District Attorney to handle all children's cases in Brooks County and another county. Each law enforcement agency is required to have one officer with advanced training in child abuse to perform the investigation for the most serious cases. Both the Sheriff's office and the Quitman Police Department each have only two investigators, with one investigator usually taking the lead on child abuse and neglect.

Training

The CPS supervisor identified two areas where additional training is needed—on-the-job training and the development and use of collateral contacts. Even though more experienced staff are being hired, they still need on-the-job training to help them understand policies and regulations and how to develop a case. The second area identified is the development and usage of nonfamily member contacts. During 1997, the State required differential collateral contacts based on the risk of maltreatment level—a high-risk level requires three contacts, moderate risk requires two, and low risk requires one contact. Workers may use another caseworker as a collateral contact.

Future Plans

The revised protocol and case review processes provide an opportunity to examine agency interactions, review CPS, and identify and prioritize areas where additional change is needed. The need for additional contact between caseworkers and victims has been identified. Currently, the State requires that the workers see parents twice a month and the child once a month. CPS staff felt this was insufficient. Increasing contacts with the child will give the caseworkers greater understanding of the child's needs and increase workers' ability to determine the progress the child is making. The State has only recently begun focusing on family-centered practice for CPS workers, though this has been a focus for placement workers in Brooks County for more than one year. No evaluation of the changes to the protocol has been made or is planned at this point. Some review or examination of the changes is needed to ensure that they are having the intended effect.

Another area of change is improved information sharing between CPS and mental health agencies. The State requires information sharing to protect the child, but in practice CPS staff have found it difficult to share information with mental health agencies. CPS is working at the regional level to address this issue.

DFCS is also hoping to work more closely with the Department of Juvenile Justice. DFCS staff believe that the two agencies need to work together on cases in both agencies. Joint training is currently under negotiation for the two agencies.

A State initiative is under consideration in which the United Way will set up a statewide telephone hotline. While United Way does not have an office in Brooks County, the United Way in another county could handle multiple counties.

SUMMARY

In general, the process for revising the protocol was described as easy. Participants found the time to do the work and regularly attended meetings. High-level staff participated in the process, and all took the opportunity to learn and understand the roles played by each agency. Interaction with the school system has been one of the greatest areas of improvement. The affects of the new MDT will still need to be determined, but the results of the first meeting were considered positive and a learning experience.